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Laura DeForce Gordon

by Maurice Hill and Ralph Lea

Laura DeForce Gordon

The first citizen of Lodi to receive national recognition and make a mark on our nation was Laura DeForce Gordon.

Laura was born in Erie County, Pennsylvania, August 17, 1838. She was one of nine children of Abram and Catherine Doolittle Allen DeForce, who was a first cousin to Ethan Allen of revolutionary fame. The DeForce family were originally French Huguenots (Protestants) who came to America to escape religious persecution.

The Abram DeForce family moved to LaCrosse, Wisconsin on the upper Mississippi River.

Laura DeForce's early education was meager. She was self-educated, attaining prominence as a lecturer and orator at an early age. Laura entered the lecture field when but fifteen years of age, astounding her audience with her fluent speech and wisdom.

At an early age, Laura was different from other children. She was able to go into hypnotic trances and give lectures from the spirit world. In her teenage years, Laura became a spiritual medium and gave lectures in public meeting halls where she would go into trances and speak from the "other side." Laura represented an organization known as "Friends of Reform," a group of intellectual reformers of the great mysteries of life.

On May 21, 1858 Laura started a personal diary which reveals many character qualities in her life and a record of her activities.

At this time, as a young spiritualist, she started on a lecture tour throughout the north-eastern part of the United States. Laura received criticism from the local clergy. She was referred to as an "Infidel" and showed her ability to take part in controversial issues.

Even though Laura became quite ill during her tour she pushed herself to fulfill her lecture obligations and later toured the midwest with her lecture circuit.

In New York State she visited a prison and was deeply moved by the terrible conditions that she saw. Laura felt a need to help "free the prisoners from bondage that was a living tomb." A strong social conscience was apparent in her at an early age.

In the diary, Laura wrote poems and her life-long resolutions to try to accomplish within her brief life on earth. Laura was very romantic in her prose and poetry, enjoyed a good time and was a very feeling person toward her family and friends.

Although Mrs. Gordon had only a grammar school education, she wrote very eloquently and with a style that denoted brilliance.

From this same diary we learn that Laura DeForce, in 1854 at the age of 21, met Susan B. Anthony, who became the first woman to be admitted to the practice of law before the U.S. Supreme Court. Both women were interested in spiritualism and Laura was introduced to the older woman after she had given a lecture on the above mentioned subject. Laura's impression of Susan B. Anthony was not altogether complimentary as she indicates she didn't take a

liking to Miss Anthony as she appeared cold, unfeeling and intolerant to those who did not believe as she did.

Charles H. Gordon was born in Scotland, October 16, 1833, educated at Christ Social London and studied medicine under Dr. Oldham of London.

Dr. Charles H. Gordon

Dr. Gordon arrived in the United States in 1860 and when the Civil War was started he became a captain in the Third Rhode Island Volunteer Cavalry.

Captain Gordon was in the Red River Campaign and then assigned to duty in the Department of the Gulf.

Laura DeForce met Captain Charles Gordon in Rhode Island and they were married in 1862. Mrs. Gordon accompanied her husband to New Orleans where for two years he was on the staff of General Banks.

Charles Gordon, Physician and Captain brought travel and excitement into Laura's life. Her husband took her into Civil War Hospitals where she found herself often being "under fire," and exhibiting there the courage which was one of the dominant characteristics of her life.

Dr. Gordon's medical education has no known record. However, he was known later as one of the best doctors in San Joaquin County. Captain Gordon as adjutant of his post during the Civil War made an inspection tour of his camp after a major battle had been fought. In the camp's hospital an operation was in process. A soldier, his thigh a bloody pulp, was having his leg removed. Captain Gordon paused for a moment in the surgery and registered disapproval as to the manner in which the operation was being conducted, the result was that he himself completed the operation, amazing his staff, none of whom suspected that he had wide medical knowledge.

Late in the war Captain Gordon, still serving as adjutant of his post, took steps to remove a saloon located within a few steps of the post's main gate. A prominent general of the army was receiving compensation from the saloon and when Gordon tried to press the matter the Captain was dishonorably discharged as a result.

Dr. Gordon then accepted the commission of Major under General DeBordon of the Liberal Army under Mexican President Juarez, at the end of 15 months he resigned his commission and the Gordons moved to the middle west.

In 1867 Charles and Laura Gordon traveled alone across the western plains toward Nevada in a converted civil war ambulance wagon.

In the Kansas area the Gordons met Buffalo Bill Cody, hunting for fresh meat for the army. Buffalo Bill rode with Charles and Laura for a week before returning to his post. Bill gave Laura a small pair of field glasses which she later had covered with Mother of Pearl.

Laura DeForce Gordon was the first white woman to settle in the White Plains, Nevada area and the miners of the town treated her like royalty.

The doctor started his practice in Nevada and Laura started to lecture in California and Nevada.

When Laura lectured, she would invite debate. Men would get up and start debating with her but it was said "she would turn it on them every time and the audience would roar."

The Grass Valley Union, December 22, 1867: "The lady talks like a book though she looks like a woman, with a learning and intellect that can match a doctor of divinity she wears quite naturally beautiful curls framing a bright face, feminine in all its contours."

Laura DeForce Gordon gave her first public address for equal rights for women February 19, 1868 in San Francisco at Platt's Hall where the small crowd became the nucleus for woman suffrage in California.

The Gordons spent two years at White Plains and Virginia City. Laura wrote a letter to a Nevada newspaper about her various lectures there. She received an invitation to visit Austin and decided to go. She left Virginia City June 16th by Wells Fargo and Company's overland coach line. Laura had this to say, "After a ride of 180 miles over some of the roughest roads, occupying two days and one night, at last I reached my destination, Austin."

The people expected her to lecture the following evening "which enabled me to wait till I had recovered somewhat from exhaustion occasioned by the long and hard ride I had."

Mrs. Gordon's first lecture was on the suffrage question. Admittance was $1.00 for gentlemen, ladies free.

Laura rode to Ophir Canyon Mining Camp, 45 miles distant in the mountains. "Here I found board and lodging with the only American family in the place, and at once commenced prospecting for a place to lecture in. Such a thing as a church, hall or schoolhouse could not be found within 45 miles of Austin, but there were two fine saloons (whiskey shops). And, after seeing the proprietor of one of them and offering him $30.00 in coin, I secured the use of it for four evenings with the privilege of shutting up the bar for each evening before the lecture."

The meetings were well attended considering the limited population of the town. The audience was well-behaved and appeared intelligent, however a "mysterious clanking of glasses over in the direction of the irrepressible bar, on two or three

occasions, evinced the love of spiritous stimulant over that of spiritual enlightenment.

My last lecture was on Tuesday evening, June 30th not having perfected the arrangements to visit Belmont, I was obliged to wait a few days. In the meantime, the patriotic population of Ophir had made arrangements to celebrate the great national anniversary, the Fourth of July. Their orator had been duly engaged but illness prevented his coming, in consequence of which the committee must engage the only available person or disappoint themselves and about 75 others. I believe that is about the population inclusive of Shoshones, Chinese, etc. An invitation was extended to me on the morning of the third to deliver the oration on the following day. I accepted, and for once in the annals of Nevada's history one of the inferior beings (classed with idiots, paupers and criminals) officiated as orator of the day."

Here is her detailed account of the participation in the Fourth of July celebration at Ophir in the free mountain air.

From P.B. Rowell's saloon across to the Smith Brothers Saloon a line was stretched from which gracefully floated, side by side, the stars and stripes and the mexican white, red and green — emblematic of the feeling of union and harmony existing between the two republics. May it ever continue.

At eleven o'clock the procession was formed by the Marshal, Mr. John S. Nicholson, and conducted to Smith Brother's new hall where the exercises of the day were held.

Mr. Nicholson then, in a few remarks peculiar to the man, and appropriate to the occasion, introduced Mr. S.S. Robinson, President of the day. On being enthusiastically greeted by the audience, Mr. Robinson came forward and gave a brief but beautiful address.

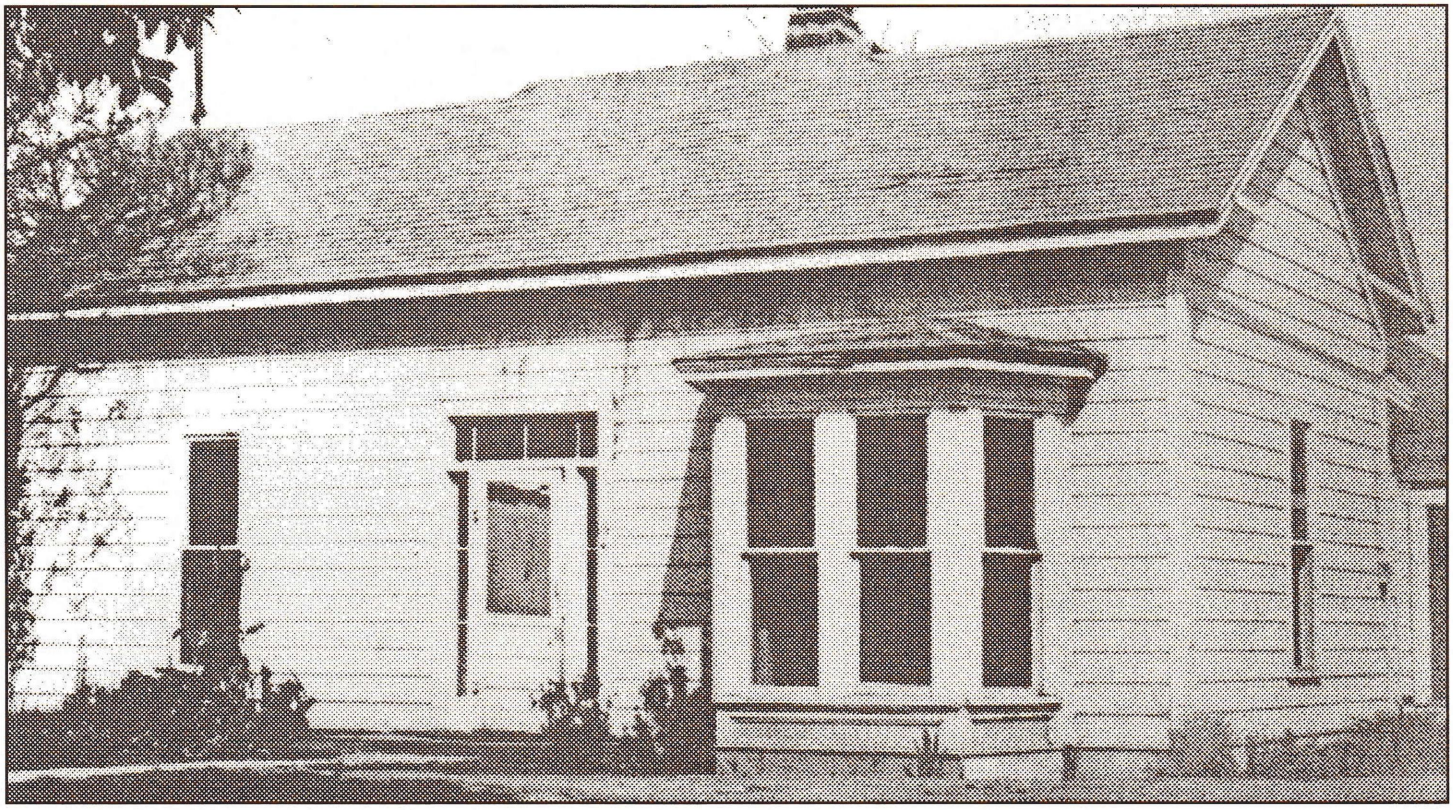
An impressive prayer was then offered by Mr. John Horn, the Chaplain of the day, which was followed by our national anthem sung by the Glee Club. The Declaration of Independence was read in a clear and impressive tone by Mr. H.M. Grant followed by the Star Spangled Banner from the Glee Club. A poem written for the occasion was read by Mr. William Doolin when the orator of the day, Laura DeForce Gordon was introduced. The fair speaker engaged the undivided attention of her audience for an hour during the delivery of her address. She congratulated the people of Ophir in not only occupying one of the most elevated geographical positions on the Pacific coast (7,000 feet), but one of the most advanced political positions as evinced by their selection of a lady to deliver the Fourth of July oration without having a precedent west of the Rocky Mountains. Mrs. Gordon treated us with an originality in her address not usually found in those

Laura DeForce Gordon

stereotyped Fourth of July orations. She spoke in glowing terms of the commencement of that grand national thoroughfare, the Pacific Railroad amid the throes of civil war, and its rapid completion in a time of peace and progress; of the benefit accruing from a system of cheap and rapid locomotion by means of which the people could have an opportunity of an interchange of kindly feeling and generous sentiments, of the formation of a grand and magnificent republic of the whole American continent modeled after the planetary system that intelligence is the scale, in which all without distinction of sex, race, creed or color should be weighed, and finally that the formation of any government to be permanent, must rest on the eternal and immutable principles of truth, justice and right. At the conclusion of her oration, a vote of thanks was unanimously tendered to Mrs. Gordon, in which she responded in a poetic and feeling manner.

She then returned to Belmont to lecture and from there returned to Austin for another engagement. She was asked to give a lecture on temperance which she did.

Mokelumne (Lodi) at the time the Gordons arrived in town.



Laura DeForce Gordon residence on Lockeford Street, Lodi; Demolished 1954.

Photo courtesy of Bank of Stockton Covello Collection

Mrs. Gordon was urged to visit new Silver Mines at White Pine and give a lecture. One inducement was that no one had ever lectured there before, not even a Methodist preacher. The mines were reported rich and she was advised to settle there; so, she wrote her husband to come and, if not satisfied, they would return together. They left Austin July 14th in an open wagon called a "stage" for a ride of 120 miles through deserts and over mountains. The first day we drove but 35 miles and stopped for the night at Dry Creek Station.

The accommodations were very acceptable though primitive enough. A sack filled with straw and a few blankets in addition, thereto, spread upon the ground, made a bed that was shared by a fellow lady traveler and myself. We were in an adobe cabin with a waterproof roof composed of poles covered with earth and felt quite resigned as the rain was pouring down in torrents outside.

In three days we reached this county of Sever. I gave my first lecture at a place called Hamilton (or cave city) three miles below the mines; had a crowded tent (not a house for all of the buildings in the place were of canvas) and considering our close proximity to a whiskey shop or "tent" where several disciples of Bacchus were congregated, the lecture was listened to with most respectful attention. Since then I have been lecturing at this place (Treasure City) located at the mines, meeting with mine owners here who are devoted to our cause, the emancipation of human souls from every species of slavery.

In January of 1870 Mrs. Gordon returned to San Francisco to form the California Woman Suffrage Society and took an extremely active part, requesting that the most liberal policies be used in admitting delegates at the February convention. She also admonished the ladies to not sit like mummies, but to open their mouths and vote audibly.

It became apparent that the mountain towns of Nevada didn't offer Mrs. Gordon a suitable sphere for her political activities, so in the spring of 1870 Laura DeForce Gordon moved to Mokelumne (Lodi) and the doctor opened an office, becoming the second physician in town, preceded only by Dr. Williamson.

The next two years Laura represented the New California Woman Suffrage Society before the legislature in Sacramento and helped start the same type of group for Nevada. She gave over one hundred lectures in both states.

She also toured the Washington and Oregon territories, and it was on the latter in August of 1871 that word reached her that she had been nominated by the Independent Party of San Joaquin County to run for the State Senate of California.

Laura waged a brilliant campaign although the Stockton Daily Independent Newspaper refused to print anything about her. At one point, stating bitterly that the law excluded from voting "idiots, Chinese, paupers and women." She was vigorously attacked by preachers, the press, and the public for leaving her place in the home.

Although Laura received only 116 votes and lost the election, this did not slow her down.

In June 1873 Laura started her journalism profession by editing a woman's page in a new Stockton publication of a semi-weekly called "The Narrow Gauge." After a popular railway opposing the Central Pacific monopoly, William N. Glenn's newspaper lasted only six months.

The printing material of another failed publication, the "Stocktonian," was sold because of debt, and Mrs. Gordon purchased same and on the 20th of September 1873 she issued the first number of the "Stockton Weekly Leader." Laura added the equipment of the defunct San Joaquin Republican and changed her newspaper to the "Daily Leader" on May 1, 1874. It advocated the cause of democracy and woman suffrage and it enjoyed the reputation of being the only daily newspaper in the United States owned and edited by a woman.

At the close of the year Laura had removed her paper from Stockton to Sacramento where she could indulge in women's issues and general politics.

Laura eventually sold her newspaper in Sacramento and became editor of the Daily Democrat in Oakland. She represented both the Daily Democrat and the Sacramento Bee at the legislature. Even with all her newspaper and lobbying work, Laura found time to campaign for the election of woman for county office and serve a year as president of the California Woman Suffrage Society.

Laura DeForce Gordon or "Aunt Lo" as she was known to members of her family, her father Abram, and her mother, Katie, migrated to Lodi shortly after the Gordons and settled on the Gordon and DeForce tract, several acres of land extending north from Lockeford Street between Sacramento and School Streets. Laura's brother, J. Porter DeForce, a ship builder, built the Gordon house out of large timbers that would have been used on a large ship. The eight rooms had ten foot ceilings and twelve by twelve beams for the foundation. Each room had a small fireplace that was inadequate to heat such a high ceiling.

The street on the north side of the Gordon tract was named DeForce Avenue after Abram, Laura's father, who looked like Abraham Lincoln and friends called him Uncle Abe.

In 1875 Laura's sister, Gertie DeForce Cluff and George Cluff came to Lodi and three years later started her own newspaper with the help of Mrs. Gordon.

Laura sold her interests in the Oakland Daily Democrat in May of 1878 in order to have women represented in California's Constitutional Convention. Mrs. Gordon ran as a candidate for the convention but did not win. She attended in the capacity of a reporter and with the help of San Francisco delegates drafted a clause which prevented the disbarment of women from any lawful business or profession.

The same year Laura and a good friend, Mrs. Clara Shortridge Foltz, were instrumental in securing the passage of a bill permitting women to practice law in the State of California.

The same year the legislature founded Hastings College of Law as part of the State University.

Mrs. Gordon and Mrs. Foltz applied for admission to the new law school. They attended a few lectures before the registrar informed the women that they could no longer attend classes.

The two women immediately brought suit against the school and the district court set February 25,

Sacramento Street looking south from Elm Street; Lodi, 1890

1879 as the date to hear the case.

The Chronicle covered the hearing but were more interested in what the two women wore and how they looked.

The paper reported Mrs. Gordon "wore a stylish black silk dress" and that both women had hair that the reporters found fascinating. Mrs. Foltz's "profuse hair was done in braids, which fell backward from the crown of the head like an alpine glacier lit by a setting sun," while Mrs. Gordon had "curls enough to supply half the thin-haired ladies of San Francisco with respectable switches."

In the decision the judge ruled that the law school under the State of California must admit any student fourteen years old and of good moral character. Nothing was said about women although the effect was grant women admission.

It is unclear whether the women, Laura and Clara, returned to Hastings or not, but on December 6, 1879 they became the first two women to be admitted to the Bar of the California Supreme Court.

It seemed that Dr. Charles Gordon had a wife and family in Scotland that were looking for him through detectives in America in 1880. When Laura heard this she divorced the doctor. He remained in Lodi with a good medical practice and remarried for a third time to Emily Stafford.

After becoming a lawyer, Laura concentrated most of her energies for the next five years into her practice. She opened an office in San Francisco, but returned to her Lodi residence on the weekends. She specialized in criminal law and often demonstrated her tactical skill and persuasive eloquence to a packed courtroom.

In 1880 after a noteworthy piece of legal work in which an Italian was saved from execution on a charge of murder, when the verdict was read the men in the courtroom cheered and the women cried. This earned Laura an election as an Honorary Member of the Royal Italian Literary Society of Rome.

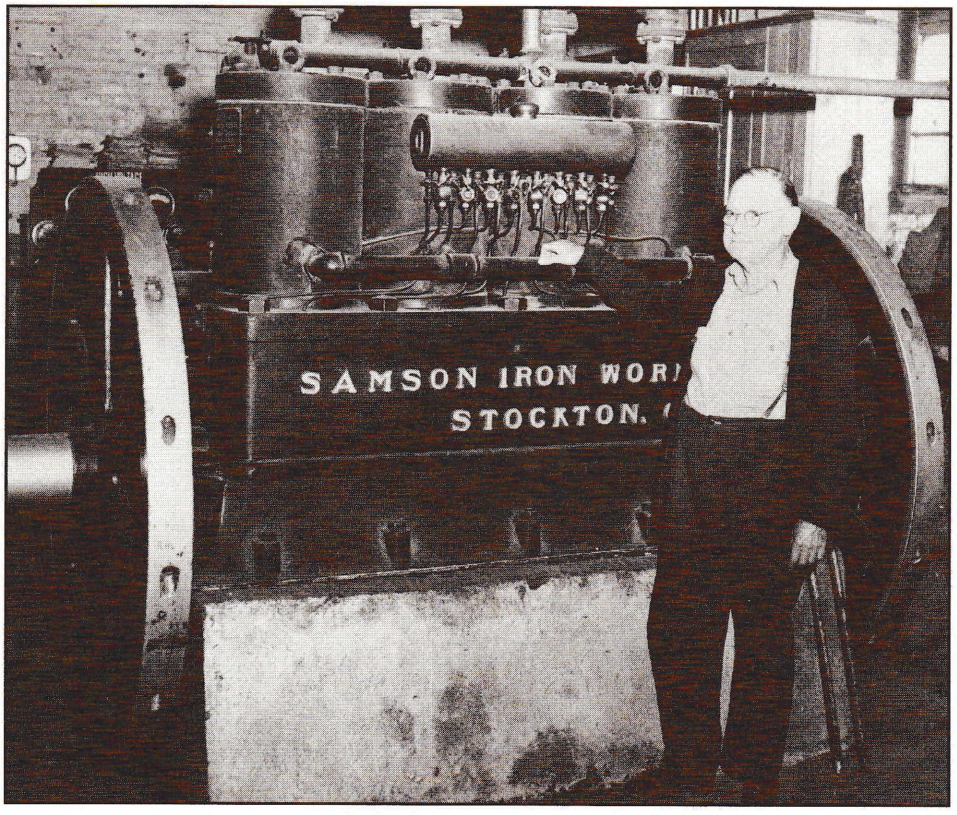
A year later the Daily Examiner describes the trial of George Wheeler, accused of strangling his sister-in-law. Mrs. Clara Foltz was for the prosecution and Laura DeForce Gordon for the defense. Mrs. Foltz made her opening address followed by Mrs. Gordon for the defense who said, "The eloquent counsel on the side has spoken without her usual logic, a fact that no one regrets more than I do... ." This brought Mrs. Foltz to her feet with a bang to inform the court that, "I have read about as much law as the counsel on the other side and that I do not want to be misrepresented.

The judge called the lawyers to order and told them they must make allowance for each other's zeal and behave as lawyers ought to.

Spectators took a lively interest in the legal tilts between lady lawyers. Mrs. Gordon pleaded insanity for her client although the result of the trial is unknown.

In 1884 Laura again became president of the California Woman Suffrage Society, this time holding the office for ten years. She also attended and spoke at the 17th Woman Suffrage National Convention in Washington, D.C. in 1885, and on February 2nd of that year became the second woman to be admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Susan B. Anthony was the first, Laura gave many talks on the anti-Chinese subject. The Lodi Cyclone called Mrs. Gordon a fine debater, and as a public speaker, she is logical, forcible and sympathetic.

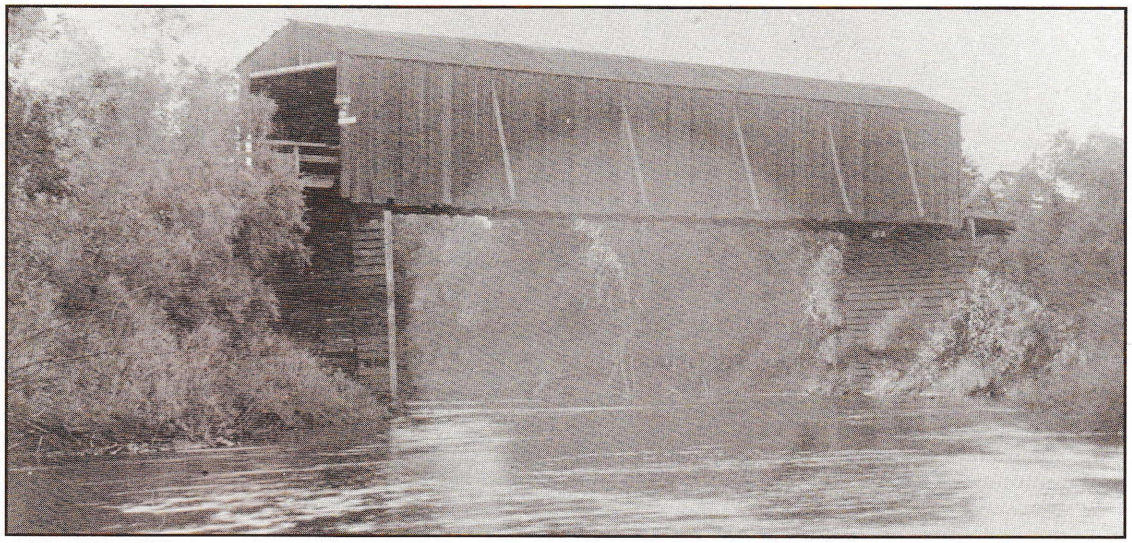
Mary Walker cleaned house for Laura DeForce Gordon. Mary often brought her three-year old son, Georgie, with her. Laura was childless and was attracted to the good nature of the little boy. Mary would not let the child go for adoption, but



George Walker, adopted son of Laura DeForce Gordon (then Verne Gordon), worked for Cary Bros. until 1910.

He went on to work for the City of Lodi at the Lodi Water Works.

He is pictured here with a Samson steam engine, 1940.



◀ *First Bridge, Cherokee and Mokelumne*

▼ *Hand carved jewelry box given to Mrs. Gordon in gratitude by prisoner for receiving a life sentence instead of the gallows.*

Photo Courtesy of Evelyn Hassbaum

she did agree to let Laura raise the boy. Laura drew up the guardianship papers in 1886 and renamed the boy Vern Gordon after his mother died. There is no evidence that Mrs. Gordon's new responsibility tied her down. Laura was known for great long lectures when Vern misbehaved. Vern changed his name back to George Walker when he became of age. He felt he had an unhappy childhood being left alone so much of the time. When living in San Francisco with his guardian he would light the fireplaces for Jewish families during the Sabbath and make pocket money.

Laura DeForce Gordon published a letter to the tax collector and electors of San Joaquin County — whereas taxation without representation is tyranny; and whereas a native born American citizen above the age of 21 years and prohibited from voting because of my sex: therefore, take notice that I pay my taxes of the year 1890 under a solemn protest against such tyranny and injustice.

Laura was back lobbying at the Sacramento Legislature preparing bills for rights for women.

Laura was invited to lecture at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 on the silk worm industry in America. Laura had started the silk culture in California. During this time Laura took Vern to meet Buffalo Bill Cody at his Wild West Show. Vern was hired to load rifles with blanks for the show. Laura spent over three months at the exposition judging the silk exhibit.

Laura had a lifetime pass to ride the Central Pacific Railroad in gratitude for a legal case that she won on the railroad's behalf. With this pass, Laura traveled extensively, writing many articles for newspapers as a travel guide. She published a book, "The Great Geysers of California and How to Reach Them."

In 1901, Laura gave up law practice in San Francisco and returned permanently to Lodi. She wanted to give her son the benefit of rural surroundings. Laura farmed a ranch that she owned near town but maintained her residence on Lockeford Street.

While Mrs. Gordon was still listed as an attorney at law in the Lodi and Stockton directories, a lot of time was spent writing letters to Clara Colby and other friends.

Laura's brother, J. Porter DeForce, had a daughter, Carrie, who was six years old when her mother died and became an orphan at twelve years of age.

Carrie met Vern Gordon at

Early harvesting of grain in Lodi.

Date:
May 19, 1986
Wardrobe's Grove Ice Cream Stand and Resting Bench.

Laura's (Aunt Lo's) house. When Vern became twenty-one years of age in 1904, he changed his name back to George Walker and married Carrie DeForce, Laura's niece.

George and Carrie had a son, Sidney, born 1904, and when he died two years later, Laura experienced the "snapping" of her interest in life.

To distract herself from the tragedy, Laura took a lecturing job and while in Los Angeles caught a cold. She returned to Lodi but passed away on April 5, 1907 from bronchial pneumonia. She was placed briefly in the front parlor of her home on Lockeford Street. Laura was taken to the Harmony Grove Church and buried in the family plot at the cemetery.

The will of Laura DeForce Gordon gave forty acres of land in the town of Arnold plus several parcels of property in Lodi, including a livery stable to her son, George Walker.

Gertie DeForce Cluff was given Laura's house on Lockeford Street and property in Woodbridge. Another sister, Carrie Carlton and her children, Katie and Bryan, received a town lot. Laura's law books, one hundred volumes, went to Will Cluff. $1,333.15 in cash was divided among the family.

Laura DeForce Gordon was a most remarkable woman. She was highly intelligent and a super champion for the liberation of women. She was a first-class orator and a lawyer of no mean ability... one of Lodi's greatest citizens.

Norma Standard Posey, grandniece of Laura, was present at the deathbed of Mrs. Gordon. A lawyer, H.R. McNoble brought three deeds to the house for signing. Laura, in her weakness, managed to scratch off two signatures but was unable to sign the third deed. Her last words were, "Never Procrastinate!"

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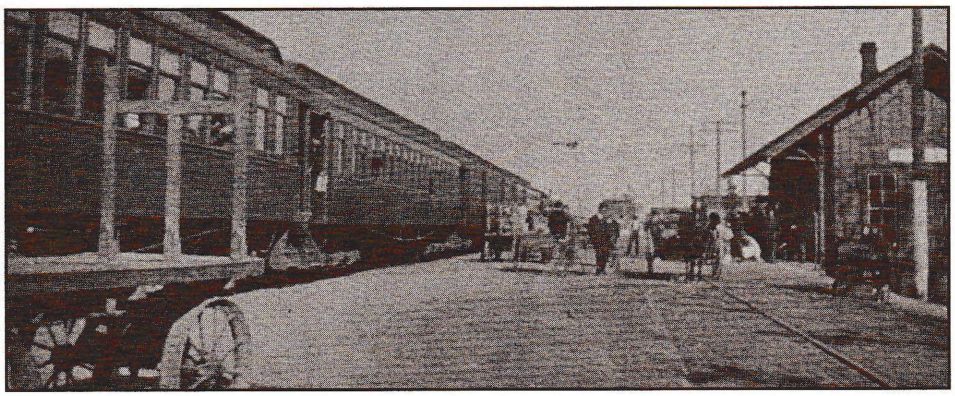

First depot in Lodi and Central Pacific passenger train.